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GUY DEBORD: BEYOND THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

ALL, LEXICON DAS EVENT, GUY DEBORD, SPECTACLE, TECHNOLOGY

Yet, let us add that the accumulated capital is that of the Subject who has become a total image, immersed in a world of information where reality is nothing but a copy of copies. One of the first texts to begin a critique of representationalism, of the production of reality out of *images*: a world where Plato's Cave becomes our only reality, but one that is itself inverted, one in which the shadows on the wall vanish into the wall and we follow them into the darkness. This is the *Society of the Spectacle*. Sitting here at my desktop peering into the screen of my computer, or momentarily lifting my iPhone and peering at the face of my young daughter as she talks to me from a city hundreds of miles away I realize this is our reality now. We've all vanished into the screens of an unreal world and come back out and let the screens follow us into our world.

"But a critique that grasps the spectacle's essential character reveals it to be a visible negation of life — a negation that has taken on a visible form."¹ Yes, it has, yet we no longer realize it as a negation of life — instead, it is our life, our reality; we've become immersed 24/7 in information, it follows us everywhere now rather than us following it. The shadows are alive now, it is only us that exist in stasis, a simulated image turning in a void; our actual selves have become data — roaming beyond us in the onlife worlds we once inhabited as passive onlookers. The tools of this immersive process are no longer separate from us — as in Debord, but surround us on all sides even as we move through the world.

Debord lived in the age of television, in a media age of print and electronic media as monolithic and bound to specific encapsulations. People now move with the dataflows, follow their trails in work, play, and sleep. We are never without this new sheath of information that wraps us in its cocoon like an agent of light without reflection. For Debord the spectacle presented itself as a vast inaccessible reality that can never be questioned. Its sole message is: "What appears is good; what is good appears." The passive acceptance it demands is already effectively imposed by its monopoly of appearances, its manner of appearing without allowing any reply.(KL 475)

Ours is an inverse relation to this. We live in the appearance of appearances, we are no longer passive in regard to information: we are information, inforgs or information organisms (Floridi) that actively pursue the life of images as producers rather than consumers. Many of us have become knowledge-workers or part of that new class termed the cognitariat. Others live in the

lesser worlds of the precariat, the service worlds of older forms of economic slavery, shifting with the shadows of older forms of work and bound to a precarious world where they are become more and more marginalized as machines replace them year by year.

Yet, Debord was correct when he said that the spectacle aims at nothing other than itself. (KL 488) In a world where the appearance of appearances is the only reality there is no sense of the physical only the immaterial sign that tracks itself in the spectacle is true and substantial. One is nothing but data now, therefore one's physical embodiment means nothing to the spectacle: only one's data counts as appearance of appearance – this is your true body now, a data-body floating among the onlife worlds as a transactional commodity for the spectacle's consumption. You are no longer a consumer: you are what is consumed. Your dividual or affective relations as data are consumed by thousands of economic machines daily as part of the spectacles mapping and tracking programs. What these systems know is your desires, your affective relations, your dividuality. They use that to market you and consume you.

Debord's belief in the individual has also vanished: "Individual reality is allowed to appear only if it is not actually real." (KL 505) Nothing is real, everything is real. The individual has become a dividual (Deleuze):

The affect is impersonal and is distinct from every individual State of things: it is none the less singular, and can enter into singular combinations and conjunctions with other affects. The affect is indivisible and without parts; but the singular combinations that it forms with other affects form in turn an indivisible quality, which will only be divided by changing the quality quantitatively (the 'dividual'). The affect is independent of all determinate space-time; but it is none the less created in a history which produces it as the expressed and the expression of a space or a time, of an epoch or a milieu (this is why the affect is the 'new' and new affects are ceaselessly created, notably by the work of art).²

The dividual as affective relations is produced by the spectacle-machine: an image, a part-object – a data-being that is both mobile and dispersed in the networks of global data; but since there is no inside or outside (i.e., the presence/absence dichotomies of metonymy) to the online world of the inforq we've merged with the spectacle beyond recognition as appearance. Our bodies continue to be dispersed among the security spaces of the neoliberal order, but those are only the entrapments of our onlife self: the commoditized mobile carrier of our data packets. Only the dividual matters not the body that carries it. As Debord says:

When the real world is transformed into mere images, mere images become real beings – dynamic figments that provide the direct motivations for a hypnotic behavior. (KL 508)

We are our images not the other way round. We are Plato's world magnified: codified Ideas that have been copied into copies and let loose upon the global datastream. This is why bodies have such difficulties with identity theft: your real being is an image, a dividual that is no longer under your control; and, even, more it has its own life beyond you. Like any other life form it is open to vulnerability, hacking, pirating, manipulation, and theft: it can turn your body into a criminal tool, or take from your body any and all property. There is no security anymore. You are nothing more than a blip on the insecure screen of life.

You are nothing but Subject-as-data. The securitization of one's onlife life is first and foremost a 24/7 project. One's alienated being roams beyond you like a dark twin who is up to no good. Yet, as Debord will remind us: "The spectacle is the bad dream of a modern society in chains and ultimately expresses nothing more than its wish for sleep. The spectacle is the guardian of that sleep." (KL 531) But there is no sleep in our mobile spectacle, only vigilance: permanent paranoia. One can always lose one's identity and one's life to an *other*.

When Debord suborned the mediatization of reality to a bureaucratic form he did not know it would become what it is now: we no longer need administrators who channel and concentrate power in some objective form, rather we have internalized these forms of power and administrate ourselves. When he said that the "social separation reflected in the spectacle is inseparable from the modern state – the product of the social division of labor that is both the chief instrument of class rule and the concentrated expression of all social divisions" (KL 551), he did not see that in our information age power would be dispersed within the networks invisibly shaping our desires through other means. The normalization of this mode of command and control has become ubiquitous and invisible; reversible: we enter it and it enters us – we are shaped even as we shape. The feedback loops are continuous and have no horizon nor hierarchical organization.

Whereas for Debord the general separation of worker and product tends to eliminate any direct personal communication between the producers and any comprehensive sense of what they are producing. (KL 574) In our age there is instead total immersion between worker and product, and communication has cut the manager out of the equation to the point that what is produced is the user herself as dividual, as affect in the spectacle.

He spoke of there being no freedom apart from activity,

and within the spectacle activity is nullified – all real activity having been forcibly channeled into the global construction of the spectacle. Thus, what is referred to as a "liberation from work," namely the modern increase in leisure time, is neither a liberation of work itself nor a liberation from the world shaped by this kind of work. None of

the activity stolen by work can be regained by submitting to what that work has produced. (KL 584)

In our time the construction is complete, and we are on life 24/7. There is no separation between work and leisure: one is always working even in leisure. One's dividual life and one's bodily life are both commodities in a surplus-value regime that never ends until death. And even in death one's artificial immortal life goes on as part of the spectacle of global capitalism. Data is never lost only degraded.

One could say that our age is not so much the Society of the Spectacle, as it is the Society of the Immersion: we've become immersed in images to the point that we are *images*. There is no separation as in Debord. We have entered our images as appearance: it is the image, not us that is real in this world of immersion. Only signs are real, not bodies. Yet, it is our bodies that carry the signs and are still paraded before the humiliation of the Law and State.

1. Debord, Guy (2011-03-15). *Society of the Spectacle* (Kindle Locations 464-466). Soul Bay Press. Kindle Edition.
2. Colebrook, Claire; Colebrook, Claire (2013-05-13). Gilles Deleuze (Routledge Critical Thinkers) (p. 61). Taylor and Francis. Kindle Edition.

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